

# THE RESPECTABLE MUCKRAKER

Old Peace Corps execs never die; one of them  
just founded The Washington Monthly magazine

By Donald Smith

"WELL, TRY to find out who he is and call him back. He sounds like some kind of tycoon."

Charles Peters, editor of The Washington Monthly magazine, replaced the telephone on its hook and somewhere in the maze of tiny fifth-floor offices at 1150 Connecticut Ave. NW a secretary must have hauled down a copy of "Who's Who" and began trying to figure out the identity of whoever it was that called earlier, while Peters was out. Evidently he had sounded like a potential backer.

Peters is a pudgy, 42-year-old ex-Peace Corps executive with salt-and-pepper gray hair cut about the same length and style as found on an ancient Grecian bust. His magazine, a cross between the Atlantic Monthly, the New Republic and Ramparts, will make its fifth appearance on newsstands next month. If Peters can straighten out his difficulties with his assorted writers and artists, the Monthly might make it through the first year, that dangerous time for new magazines.

The suite of rooms occupied by the Monthly is connected by a labyrinthine hallway which eventually leads to Peters' office: an acute oblong with bare wood floors and unadorned, cream-colored walls. It is occupied by an economy-size walnut desk, a few chairs, and Peters. He wears a rope tie, loosened slightly at the neck of an olive button-down shirt, wash-and-wear trousers and buckskin shoes. The objects on the desk include volumes of Huck Finn and Don Quixote, which were presents from Peace Corps colleagues, and paperback copies of The Federalist, Edmund Burke and The Columbia Desk Encyclopedia. There is also an empty Lily coffee cup and a wrinkled pack of True (blue) cigarettes, which he chain-smokes. During an interview he ran out and bummed two Winstons.

Most of Peters' present troubles stem from the fact that he is not a professional journalist—at least he wasn't until he founded the Monthly. He was born in Charleston, W. Va., received an M.A. in English from Columbia University, and began his career writing advertising copy for the J. Walter Thompson agency in New York. He left to earn a law degree from the University of Virginia and then returned to Charleston, where he operated a private law practice for three years until 1960 when he ran for the state legislature. In addition to his own campaign in Kanawha County he managed the presidential campaign of John F. Kennedy there. Both candidates won. After one session in the legislature, Peters felt the call of the New Frontier. He came to Washington in 1961 to join the office of the general counsel of the newly created Peace Corps.

Later in the same year, Peace Corps director Sargent Shriver appointed Peters to head his new office of evaluation, a confidential reporting service which was to make first-hand examinations of Corps overseas projects and the confidential, critical reports with the top echelon of the agency. The reports were written by

full-time staff members and by carefully chosen freelancers, including New Yorker magazine writers Richard Rovere and Calvin Trillin.

"It amounted to kind of an in-depth magazine on the Peace Corps," Peters says. "Over the years many who knew of this operation said it should extend to other branches of government. So often when things go wrong the top guy is the last to hear about it; and by then it's too late to help."

Peters had been tossing around possibilities of expanding his work for some time, and early in the spring of 1967 he settled on the idea of a magazine. That May he served notice with Jack Vaughn, Shriver's successor, that he was planning to leave within a year. He enlisted financial support from John D. Rockefeller IV and soon afterwards from Joseph Crowley, president of the New Haven Terminal, to add to his own bankroll.

At the same time he was lining up capital, Peters spent his evenings and weekends contacting writers and editors, getting pledges of stories and delineating editorial policies. For much of his editorial advice he relied on Rovere, Washington correspondent for the New Yorker and one-time assistant editor of the New Masses, and Whitney Ellsworth, publisher of the New York Review of Books. Another source of advice was Timothy J. Adams, a former San Francisco newspaper reporter who was director of the Peace Corps program in Thailand. When Peters left the Corps he took Adams with him as managing editor.

The office opened on May 1 in an atmosphere of national crisis, produced partly by the rioting in the cities and partly by the general sense of desperation over the Vietnam war. During the months that followed Peters met nightly with small groups of selected government officials: mostly bright, mostly under 35 and mostly remnants of the Kennedy era. Over paper cups of beer and sherry they brainstormed the unsatisfactory tides of American society and how best to stem them. Peters is still working on story ideas that grew out of these meetings, which were suspended in the fall in order to get out the first issue by last January.

The cover of the first issue shows a dramatic photograph of a convoluted American flag, parts of it sparkling under studio lights and parts hidden in Stygian shadows. The table of contents flourished such journalistic big-names as Murray Kempton, the former columnist of the New York Post; David S. Broder, Washington Post political writer; Russell Baker, New York Times columnist; Newsday publisher Bill Moyers and Hugh Sidey, chief of the Time Magazine Washington bureau. The writing reflected the elements of the magazine's founding: intellectualism and a feeling that society was crumbling from sheer neglect. Peters' editorial credo, which appeared on the back cover, stated in part: "The American system is in trouble. It's not responding well enough or fast enough to our critical national problems."

So far the Monthly has zeroed in on the President,

Congress, assorted government agencies (not the Peace Corps—so far), lobbyists, labor, management, bureaucrats, the Pentagon, and the daily press. Although the magazine has an obvious liberal bias, it is not radical. Its diminutive size, seven by ten inches, was chosen to suggest a scholarly outlook—it approximates the size of literary and political academic journals. In handling his material, Peters applies much the same principles as he used in his Peace Corps days: He examines issues from the bottom up, believing that newspapers err in relying on information they receive from the top. The tone is one of respectable muckraking.

In a story dealing with urban transportation, Peters had his writer concentrate not on the Department of Transportation, but on highway lobbyists. If the story turned up nothing sensational, it was a sardonically entertaining examination of a powerful special interest group. (Sample: "The financing of the Highway Program was a classic raid on the Treasury. In the annals of lobbying, the highwaymen who executed this coup deserve to be listed alongside those Chinese contractors who convinced the Ch'in emperors to build the Great Wall of China.")

In addition to professional journalists, the magazine uses original sources including academicians and writers who are presently involved in government. Jane Jacobs, author of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, has contributed, as has one of President Nixon's top aides, Stephen Hess. There are two regular columns; "Views of the Press" is written by guest journalists and gives insights into the relationship between the press and government, and "The Culture of Bureaucracy" keeps a constant eye on one of Peter's favorite targets. Peters says the magazine has

met with unexpected success, when measured against his original goals. With 20,000 subscribers, enlisted in two direct mail campaigns aimed especially toward businessmen, politicians and political science professors, and from newspaper and magazine ads, he is already halfway along toward his subscription target for the first year; and his newsstand target was met on the first issue, which sold almost 8,000. He says he is satisfied with the advertising he has picked up; the June issue will include three major firms—Random House, American Telephone & Telegraph and Polaroid.

"We anticipated four years to break even," says Peters. "Now it looks like a year and a half or so."

Along the way Peters has met with some setbacks. Some writers complain of a lack of professionalism in the way Peters handles them. Stories are assigned, turned in and then sent back for major revisions, sometimes two or three times. At least one writer is now talking about a law suit over the handling of his work. M. R. Gelberg, the art director who

designed the magazine with a slick mix of heavy and light headline types and a crisp text type, resigned last month over a disagreement with Peters on the use of illustrative art. (Except for the covers, the small photograph of the mayor of Boston appearing in the current issue is the only illustrative art the Monthly has used.)

On the other hand, Peters' lack of experience strikes some as an asset. In a time when the *Saturday Evening Post*, old and established, and *Ramparts*, new and flamboyant, are heading the list of failing and failed magazines, the fact that Peters is gambling on the Monthly suggests on the face of it that he is open to the kind of innovation that has a chance of success.

The feeling among many who have come into contact with the Monthly seems to be that it is a healthy idea; and that if Peters turns it into a money-maker it will be both because and in spite of himself.

In the meantime, Peters seems to be enjoying himself immensely.